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THE FIRST ASCENT OF MOUNT OLYMPUS

BY

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In the center of one of the most beautiful stretches of wilderness country in the West, the Olympic Mountains of Washington, stands Mount Olympus, the highest peak of the range.

Mount Olympus was named El Cero de la Santa Rosalia by the Portuguese, and later the Spaniards referred to it as La Sierra de Santa Rosalia. Captain Mears saw the mountain in 1788 and named it Mount Olympus, which name was adopted by Vancouver in 1792.

The Olympic Mountains lie in a great broken mass of knife-like peaks in the center of the Olympic Peninsula, which separates Puget Sound from the Pacific Ocean. They do not rise to a great height above the sea, but their formation is of such ruggedness that, even with the commerce of the Pacific and growing cities encircling their foothills, they have remained practically unexplored.

While it is true that most of the main ranges and water systems have been followed by adventurous hunters or travelers, the scientific exploration of this wilderness is still an unwritten story and few of the maps of the interior are trustworthy except in the broadest sense. This fact was due to the supposed lack of minerals in the mountains, and to the wonderful growth of forests that bury the foothills in an almost impenetrable tangle of vegetation.

The Alaskan coast range is not more difficult to penetrate than these forest darkened crags. It is the land of the "devil's club" and "down-timber," where the explorer at times can barely chop his way through the matted underbrush; of knife-like ridges and deep cañons, where the roaring of glacier rivers disturbs the silence as they twist and plunge on their way to the sea.

The moist, westerly winds, coming in from the Pacific, precipitate this moisture on striking the upper snowfields, and bathe the lowlands for many months in the year with fogs and showers. These conditions make pack-train travel impossible except where trails have been cut towards the interior. In the work of exploration the traveler must eventually fall back on the pack-strap, which necessarily limits him to a light outfit.

It is needless to give a detailed account of our travels before reaching the mountain; suffice it to say that every moment was a lasting joy, and the beauties of mountains and forests a never-failing source of wonder. From the days when we traveled among mighty cedars where the gloom and silence could be likened only to that of some great cathedral, to the time we spent following up the crystal rivers where our shouts were lost in the roaring of the waterfalls, we were surrounded by natural beauties that are nowhere excelled.

Our party consisted of Prof. Herschel C. Parker, Walter G. Clark and the writer. At Port Angeles we secured the services of Henry Sisson and his pack train, and in Geyser Valley we were joined by William Humes. Roughly, our route began at Port Angeles on the Strait of Juan de Fuca and followed the valley of the Elwha river due south into the Olympic wilderness.

We were forced to leave our horses at the head of the Elwha River. A long snow-filled gully led us with our back loads of food and mountain necessities across the range to the head-waters of the Queets River. We named this pass after Dodwell and Rickson of the U. S. Geological Survey, who were the first men known to have crossed it. From the top of this pass you can, on a clear day, see Mount Olympus rising above some jagged intervening peaks to the westward.

We descended into the timber in the Queets valley, and pitched our camp in a position where we could get an unobstructed view of the eastern ridges of the Olympus foothills. Directly in front of our camp was a large glacier that came from a high rock-ridge which shut off the view of the big mountain. This glacier, which we later named the Humes glacier, was evidently the key to the climbing situation.

Next morning the rising sun found us moving towards this great mass of ice. Within a quarter of a mile of the frontal moraine we came to a cañon wall which delayed us so long that we were forced to put off the final attempt on Mount Olympus until the following day. The main party then returned to camp. Humes went down the cañon to reconnoiter the south side of the glacier, and I climbed up the cañon on a reconnaissance of the north side. Mount Olympus was about five miles away and lay about N. W. by W. from our camp.

Between us and the summit was the high ridge which might prove a serious barrier. This ridge was in turn partly hidden by a

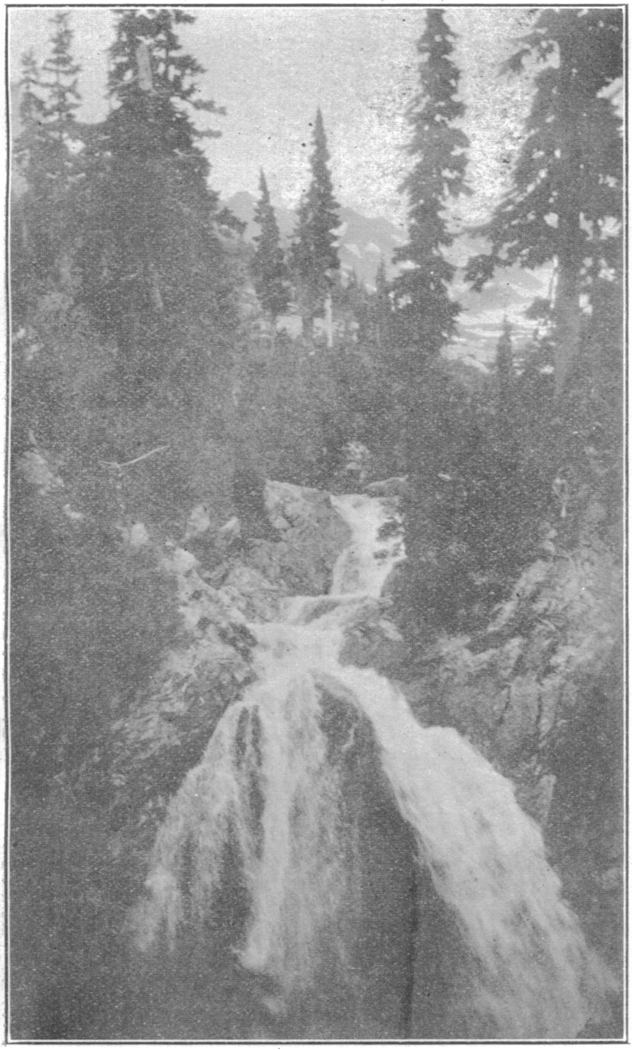

FIG. 1—Agnes Falls, Head of Queets River. Photo by Belmore Browne.

high cliff, around which the Humes glacier swept in the form of a great roadway of ice. I, therefore, devoted my attention to finding a good route to the top of the glacier, and let our other troubles wait until they confronted us. My first attempt to climb the ice was by the side of a wedge of rock several hundred feet high that split the glacier into two streams, and formed a large serac. The climbing was very rough but safe, and all seemed well until I found that the ice on the serac was breaking constantly and was liable to avalanche.

The danger turned me to the north wall, and an hour later, after traversing some cliffs, I gained the top of the glacier and found an unobstructed route to the dividing ridge. I could not tell from my position whether or not the ridge was a serious obstacle, but it appeared to be easy on the northern end, so I cut three steps in the green ice, for luck, and started campward. On my return I found a camp site much nearer the glacier, and that same day we moved our camp to the foot of the ice wall, and prepared for our final attempt.

Our climbing began at dawn the following morning, and 200 yards from camp we made a traverse at the base of a cliff where we put on the rope and settled down to work. Below the cliff we swung wide, as some rocks were falling. We scaled the serac easily, our axes ringing clear on the green ice, and beyond we could see our majestic glacial roadway sweeping gently to the big dividing ridge. The sun had risen in a sky of metallic brilliancy, and it already beat down on the snowfield with such fierceness that even through our smoked glasses the glare was painful.

A long, steady tramp brought us to the cliff that had masked the dividing ridge, and we saw above us a saddle that was not difficult to reach; a little step-cutting brought us to the top, and as our heads rose above the ridge a wonderful mountain panorama came into view.

Directly below us lay a large glacier that we knew must be one of the feeders of the Hoh River that flows into the Pacific Ocean; and beyond, towering high above us, stood Olympus—a jagged peak of rock rising from a long ridge-like base of snow. We named the pass we had just crossed, Explorers' Pass, after a club of which we were members. The descent to the floor of the Hoh glacier was accomplished quickly and we began a long tramp to a high ridge that swept in a curve to the base of the final peak. We were now traveling nearly south, our course since early morning having been a series of long zigzags between mountain ranges, using glaciers as roadways. There were many crevasses, but we made good time across the blinding snow. Now and then we would jump one of the smaller cracks, and catch glimpses of dark-green caverns that looked temptingly cool in contrast with the glare about us. The few patches of rock we passed were a pleasant relief to our eyes.

From the first step on the Humes glacier to the "bergshrund" just below the summit was a continuous snow and ice climb, and it was with the greatest mental enjoyment that we reached the narrow ridge of rock that lay below our goal. This ridge was due east of Mount Olympus; it sloped gently down on the north side to the big glacier that feeds the Hoh River, but on the south side it fell off in a precipice. To the south we could see a fine Alpine glacier that flowed parallel to and to the westward of the Queets River.

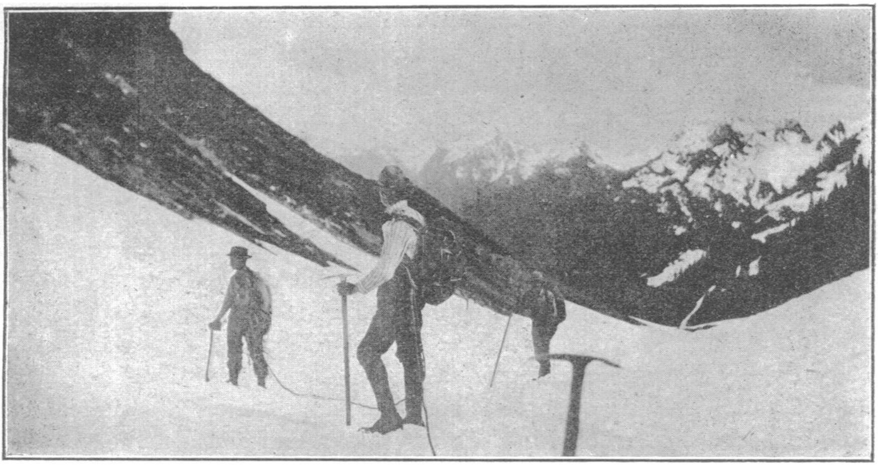

FIG. 2—Dodwell-Rickson Pass, showing headwaters of Elwha River. Photo by Belmore Browne.

Mount Olympus itself is a high ridge, steep on the south side and sloping on the north, that rises from a system of ridges extending from the valley of the Queets River to a point about ten miles to the westward. At intervals there are peaks and spurs, and the main pinnacle rises at the head of three great glaciers that feed the Hoh River, which in turn lies at the northern base of Olympus and flows westward to the Pacific Ocean. The main peak is held up by three smaller peaks that rise in regular order from the Hoh glacier. To the westward of Olympus the main ridge rises into a single pinnacle of rock, that, while it is an off-shoot from the Olympus ridge, appears to be nearly as high as Olympus. We called the western peak, Olympic Peak.

We stopped for luncheon on the narrow ridge below Olympus. A cool breeze from the south swept gently past, and before long we were glad to crouch among the sun-warmed rocks for warmth. If Gods there were on the Olympus of the Ancients, we envied them not! A lump of pemmican, a handful of zwieback, and a teapot singing beside us in the wilderness—that certainly were Paradise enough!

Before attacking the last peak Prof. Parker took a hypsometer reading as a check on our aneroid. Again we chopped and kicked steps in ice and snow, until we reached a "bergshrund" that led us to a fine "couloir" below the last rock wall. This piece of rock climbing was the most interesting work that Olympus gave us. Below the chimney, a man, once started, would have dropped a long way to the glacier below, and above were loose piles of rock that made careful climbing necessary. At last I reached a small platform and on raising my head saw that we had reached the top. My last recollection of Olympus will be of looking down on the four men below, and again, so far beneath them that the crevasses looked like fine pencil marks—the great glaciers of the Hoh gleaming in the sunlight.

After an examination of the narrow ledge that was the goal we had come so far to reach, we turned our attention to the really wonderful mountain panorama that lay around us. Our chief interest centered in the topographical features of the immediate vicinity of Mount Olympus. To the westward beyond Olympic Peak, scarcely discernible through the haze of distance, lay the Pacific Ocean. To the eastward we could feast our eyes on a veritable sea of peaks, that seemed in their rough contours and gleaming snowfields to rival even the Alaskan range in grandeur. At intervals great lines of clouds passed slowly between the peaks as if they were following well-known trails. From the northern and northwestern sides of Olympus three large glaciers descended to the valley of the Hoh River. To the southward lay a fine Alpine glacier which, like all the other Olympus glaciers, discharges its ice water into the Pacific Ocean.

While our party was not equipped for making accurate maps of the region, we cleared up the doubts existing concerning this part of the Olympic Range. Instead of the fifty glaciers said to lie in the neighborhood of Mount Olympus, we saw seven in all, five of which came from the main ridge of the mountain.

Many remarkable stories have been told concerning the wonders to be found around the slopes of the mountains, and several claims to first ascents have been made. Only one of these, however, bears the brand of sincerity—the account of a first ascent by B. J. Bretherton and party—but in the light of the latest explorations, the account places this party in a different part of the Olympic Range, and in connection with the actual topography the report is unintelligible.

The Olympic mountains are destined to become one of the greatest American playgrounds. Nowhere can more natural beauties be found than among their rugged peaks. Every stream holds treasures of the finny tribe. Salmon and trout of several varieties abound, and in no other region does that prince of game fish—the rainbow trout—grow larger, or fight more fiercely. Big game is still plentiful, and with careful supervision the hills from the snow-line to the river bottoms could be made to resemble a zoological park. Unfortunately, there are no wild sheep or goats in the Olympic mountains. It is doubtful if sheep would live there, on account of the low altitude and humidity of the mountain pastures, but it is unquestionably true that if Rocky Mountain goats were liberated in the Olympic mountains they would thrive and would be a valuable addition to the wild life of this region.

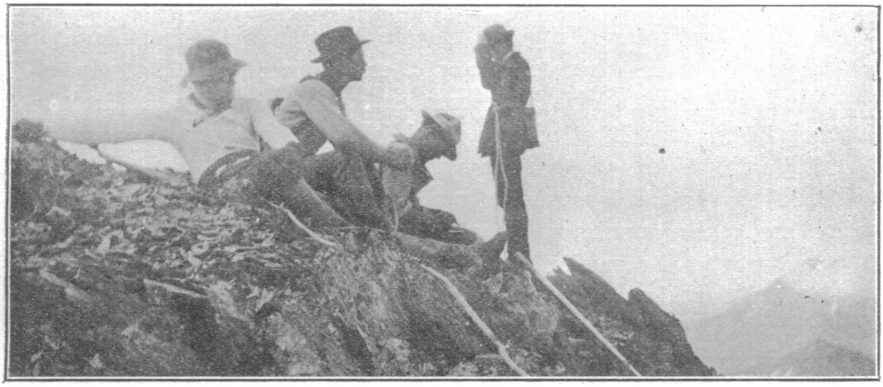

Fig. 3—Party on Summit of Mt. Olympus. From left to right, Clark, Lisson, Browne, Parker. Photo by William Humes.